Caught in the thrill and euphoria of the revolution of 25 January, later, in March 2011, Alain Badiou reflected on Egypt, writing:

The People, and only the people, are the creators of universal history ... Once a threshold of determination, obstinacy and courage has been passed, a people can indeed concentrate its existence in one square, one avenue, a few factories, a university ... The whole world will be witness to this courage, and especially to the amazing creations that accompany it. These creations will stand as proof that a people is represented here.¹

Almost two and a half years later, in August 2013, Ali Al-Haggar, a famous Egyptian singer, appeared on several TV stations performing a new song. The lyrics address an unnamed group, interpreted by most people as alluding to Islamists, Muslim Brothers, Salafis and supporters of former president Mohamed Morsi, symbolised by the protesters at the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins.² The song is entitled ‘We are a people and you are a people’ (Ihna sha’b wa intu sha’b).³ Its opening lines embody the distance that Egypt and the ‘people’ travelled between January 2011 and August 2013:

We are a people, and you are a people.
What moved our hearts never moved yours.
God is one; but we have our God, and you have your God
[...]
And because pious Egypt runs through our blood since the dawn of history
We will never become you, and you will never become us.
Gather your tribe, your kin and your tents.
Amass your shouts and screams, amass your edicts and chains
And go far away from our land because you are not us. You are a people and we are a people.

Encapsulated in the words above is a long process of struggle over the meaning, experiences and imagination of the category of ‘the people’, articulated in Arabic as ‘al-sha’b’. ‘The people’ was emblematically reflected in the famous chant ‘al-sha’b yurid’ (‘the people want’) that shook the squares of liberation in Egypt from 25 January 2011 in echoes that reverberated way beyond the physicality of space, demanding freedom, justice and equity. Yet what happened to ‘the people, its imaginations, and its deployments? How is it even conceivable that the ‘summoning of ALL’, as Badiou elaborated in his writings on the political and the event,4 has swiftly become ‘we are a people and you are a people’? Who and how are ‘the people’ invoked in such varied and oft contradictory pronouncements, to the extent that a loudspeaker placed on a security forces tank was announcing the legitimacy and the mandate of and by ‘the people’ – and the rule of law – while killing, maiming and dispersing mercilessly the protesters at the Rabaa sit-in on 14 August 2013?5 Even corpses, hurriedly wrapped in white cloth, stained with blood and with the names of those killed hand-written on them, did not escape the violence of removal, while the name of ‘the people’ and the sanctity of the law were being relentlessly recited. Are the dead of Rabaa among ‘the people’ or are ‘the people’ dead?

How can one write about ‘the people’ while having been witness (and one
cannot help but feel an accomplice) to the murder of hundreds of people in the name of the people? In fact, 26 July 2013 witnessed the massing of ‘the people’ in Tahrir – in response to demands by the army – to confer on the military the mandate and the order to fight terrorism in Egypt, a euphemism signifying members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then a small icon stating ‘Egypt fighting terrorism’ has appeared in the left-hand corner of TV screens during the airing of programmes on many stations, while the whole machinery of state and private media aggressively sell this war against terrorism to the wider audience. How can one write the shift from emancipatory imagination and struggle to a regulatory apparatus – labelled by some as the onset of a fascist order – that justifies all controls and scrapping of rights in the name of the war on terror? The difficulties of writing about the revolution have bewildered scholars since its beginnings, especially those who were witness to and participants in the unfolding events.\(^6\) But now, more than then, the difficulties are compounded.

Although the revolution was branded as ‘non-violent and peaceful’, since 25 January 2011 thousands have died in confrontations between the security state apparatus and ‘the people’, including by the hands of militias of the Muslim Brotherhood during December 2012. In some instances (such as the Abbasiyya events during protests at the Ministry of Defence) residents of the neighbourhoods also had violent skirmishes with protesters. The nomenclature of violence was not foreign to the revolution. In fact, as Bogaert reminds us: ‘non-violent political action often only becomes effective when it provokes violence, when it obliges the powerful to expose the violence that underlies the maintenance of a particular political order’.\(^7\) The interpretation of the January revolution as non-violent fits within a frame of reference and an interpretive paradigm that cannot envisage militant struggle as legitimate within a global world order of neoliberal governance.\(^8\)

Nonetheless, there was something ‘different’ about the summer of 2013: not only the violence but, more fundamentally, the deep onset of despair. While the violence that occasioned the dispersal of the sit-ins represented one facade of the mayhem that grabbed the city, another was outbursts of killings, the torching of churches, kidnappings and the mutilation of bodies that did not spare many villages and cities in Egypt. Reports of churches being attacked, particularly in the south, dead bodies of police officers and soldiers in Giza and Sinai being mutilated, museums being looted, arbitrary shootings, exhortations to kill in retaliation for lost ones and scenes of people killing people engulfed the landscape. The sounds of screaming, shouting, fighting, gunfire, speeding ambulances, whistles announcing the beginning of attacks and calling on neighbours to gather together to fight back and protect themselves, and helicopters flying over the cities and towns filled the air. The smell of teargas, of shots and, worst of all, according to a friend who was at the Imam Mosque on the night
of 14 August after the dispersal of Rabaa, of burning blood remain engraved in
the corporeal experiences that many carry. So how to write while entrapped
by violence, threats, uncertainty, confusion and a deep feeling of disappearing
possibilities, materially embodied in the silence and darkness that envelops the
city with the onset of curfew hours?

I started writing this chapter in March 2013 and presented the first version as
a paper at the Wenner-Gren workshop ‘Beyond Arab Revolutions’, held at the
Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in March
2012. Even at that time, the construct of ‘the people’ had been undergoing
radical shifts, a process that I detail below. Yet when the time for revisions came,
Egypt and ‘the people’ were in very different places. What the paper addressed
then seems so distant from and at variance with the present, that any attempt
to speak about it or analyse it appears not only superfluous and meaningless, but
downright banal. Is it possible to make sense? What follows is one attempt that
gestures at an exploration of a universe of contradictory meanings and experi-
ences, of uncertainty and contingency. I premise the paper on personal experi-
ences and encounters during the last two and a half years, and the knowledge
gained from a collaborative research project, ‘Imagining the Political’, that
started in September 2010,9 a few months before the onset of the revolution. I
complement my reflections with accounts that appeared mostly in local circuits
of knowledge production and exchange, which I read in the light of experiences
of what Asef Bayat referred to as ‘new global revolutions’.10 In what follows I
thus explore the tumultuous trajectory of the category of ‘the people’ and the
contradictory meanings and experiences thereof. While focusing on ‘events’
to reveal the contentious universe of meaning associated with ‘the people’, I
also locate these ‘visible episodes’ within the context of unfolding processes.
My aim is to challenge the facility with which events – once named, packaged
and rendered significant – become metonyms for more complex processes that
remain obscure in relation to the spectacle of events.

**The Public and the People: Once Upon a Time a Revolution Happened Here**

In her ‘Bodies in alliance and politics of the street’, Judith Butler argued:

Those who are excluded from existing polities … may be unreal only to those
who seek to monopolize the terms of the reality. And yet even when the public
sphere is defined through their exclusion, they act. Whether abandoned to
precarity or left to die through systematic negligence, concerted action still
emerges from such sites. And this is what we see … when populations amass
without the protection of the law, and without permits to demonstrate, to
bring down an unjust or criminal regime of law.\textsuperscript{11}

And this is what we saw in Tahrir and the many other squares in Egypt from 25 January 2011. Within eighteen short days, Tahrir Square became an icon for struggle, freedom and liberation. Tahrir – and the diverse, multi-layered and, more recently, contradictory meanings for which it stands – emerged as a ‘moment in time’ that was spatially grounded in the experiences of the multitudes in and away from the squares and many other public spaces. Within and constituting these public spaces, the category ‘the people’ – ‘\textit{al-sha'b}’ – or ‘the street’ – ‘\textit{al-sharia}’ – emerges as the collective that speaks and acts together, and in the process of speaking and acting defines an emerging politics. Just before 1 pm on Friday, 28 January – also named and marked in historical imagination as the Friday of Rage – as the imam ended the prayer, ‘the people’ rose in unison at the many mosques and squares of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Port Said, Mansoura and many other cities and towns in Egypt to chant one slogan: ‘\textit{al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam}’ (the people want to dismantle the system). But who were ‘the people’ and how are they constituted as a collective articulating a revolutionary demand of change? How can we envisage the meaning of revolution and change? And what is the system to be dismantled?

The ‘system’ and the people who rose to dismantle it are two sides of the same coin; the making of one was premised on the destruction of the other through a process of radical change and transformation. Hence I argue that an inseparable part of the struggle over the meaning of the category ‘the people’ is the struggle on the ground over power, order and the reconfiguration of the political, translated metaphorically in the demand for dismantling the system writ large. The system for many comprised the security apparatus of the state, which has for many years loomed large over even the smallest details of citizens’ everyday lives. This security apparatus is intimately linked to and intersects with the economic order that is premised on what Marx pronounced more than a century ago, namely accumulation by dispossession, now translated into the aggressive machinery of neoliberal practices. These elements shape and define the very constitution of the social, its ethos, practices and categories.

The machinations to reproduce the system with only manicured reforms on its surface – deserving the label of ‘Refo-lutions’, as Bayat called it\textsuperscript{12} – underlie the most recent events of violence in the name of ‘the people’. Indeed, as Colla argued:

\begin{quote}
There is no political claim that is not made in the name of some image of the people and its revolution. Even counter-revolutionaries – such as the Muslim Brothers, business elites, Salafis and the army – understand this game and play by its rules.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}
And play they did: the security state apparatus, the Muslim Brothers, Salafis and the remnants of the old Mubarak regime, popularly known as the Felul. Hence the radically shifting meanings of ‘the people’ over 2012–13. Most disturbing has been the struggle for power between the security state and the business elite on the one hand, and the Muslim Brothers and Salafis on the other, over the dead bodies of ‘the people’. No matter how tight the grip and how vicious the battle, one wonders: are the people dead, understood in Badiou’s terms as those who have embarked despite all odds and oppression on ‘the organized fidelity to the communism as movement’? The latter, of which the revolution in Egypt has been but one instance among many spreading from Tunisia, to Yemen, Spain, Greece, Chile and the US, among others, is defined as the ‘common creation of a collective destiny’, with two distinctive characteristics.

First, it is generic, representing in one place humanity in its entirety. In this place there are people of all the kinds [that] a population is usually made up of, all words are heard, all propositions examined, all difficulty taken for what it is. Second, it overcomes the great contradictions that the state pretends to be the only one capable of surmounting: between intellectuals and manual workers, between men and women, between rich and poor, between Muslims and Copts, between people living in the province and those living in the capital …

This sense of being ‘a people’ is translated in the words of the poem which I used as a title for this paper. ‘I dreamed of being a people’ is part of Ahmed Fouad Nigm’s poem ‘As if You are Nothing’, composed in October 2010 and embodies glimpses of a different imaginary which has been born of decades of precarity that marked the consolidation of the neoliberal sociopolitical and moral order in Egypt. This imaginary has seen its contingent, sometimes contradictory and still emerging enunciation in the processes that unfolded since 25 January as well as the years of struggle that preceded it.

I propose that the fluid and contingent boundaries of ‘the people’, and the many contradictory trajectories that they have come to manifest, are related to the disruption of what constituted the politically and socially familiar (i.e. the system writ large, or the nizam). The system is not only limited to the state and its organs, but also to structures and social categories (such as gender, religion, ownership, market, communal, neighbourhood) that constitute the very realm of the social. Such disruptions, which at present appear dispersed, ephemeral and scattered, are key nodes, sites or moments in a radical process of change. Such sites and moments of disruption of the political and social familiar – which for instance emerged during the eighteen days in Tahrir – also made an ‘appearance’ at Port Said, Mansoura and Suez during spring 2013, and were ‘present’ at the
train station on the night of 2 February 2012 when the ultras gathered at Cairo Central to meet the fans returning with the bodies of the dead after the Port Said massacre; at Kasr Nil bridge on 25 January 2012 in a confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood; at the Ittihadiya presidential palace in reaction to the constitutional declaration; at the Constitutional Court and the Media Complex on 6 October; as well as at the Mahalla textile workers’ strike of 2008, to name only a few. These moments and spaces are key nodes in enabling the emergence of a critical imaginary that assembles a different possibility of ‘a people’ and a polis. These moments and sites approximate what Butler referred to as ‘the interval’. The latter is defined as

the time of the popular will, not a single will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterised by an alliance with the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not codified into law, and that can never be fully codified into law.\textsuperscript{18}

I would add that they can never be fully codified into law because they are in excess of the system of law as it exists; this excess – that is yet momentary, dispersed and ephemeral – escapes possibilities of ready containment because what it presents is outside of and not yet classifiable within the codes of law and

Figure 4.2 Eighteen short days: The emergence of a people, Tahrir Square, 25 November 2012 (Photo: H. Sabea).

--- 73 ---
the known rituals and technologies of power. It is precisely this excess that has
the potential of effecting cracks in neoliberal governance, which comprises the
condition against which a collective notion of ‘a people’ was rendered possible.
And it is also this excess that has come under attack during the struggle for power
and over the dead bodies of the people. Finally, while visibility or appearance are
important domains in the making of ‘the people’ (as Arendt has argued, seeing
and being seen by others), in the case of Egypt, what is equally important is what
happens in the invisible of the everyday, Veena Das’s ‘recesses’ in terms of daily
practices, negotiations of meaning, thinking and relating to alternatives, and so
on that make the ‘public’ appearance possible.

What were the eighteen days about and how did they become, in the language
of many, a time out of time, excised from the everyday, yet simultaneously consti-
tuting the ordinariness of another world that was imagined as possible? It was
the ordinariness of Tahrir time (its rhythms and routines, its forms of aesthetics
and sociality, and its possibilities and potentials) that became the very basis for
the ‘extraordinariness’ (or the time out of time) of Tahrir. This ordinariness/
extraordinariness constitutes also the potential for rethinking and reconfiguring
the political. Indeed, as Mouffe has argued: ‘The frontier between the social
and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and
renegotiations between social agents. Things could always be otherwise …’ And Tahrir’s eighteen days were but one moment in a long struggle that is still
unfolding and which rendered visible this possibility of the ‘otherwise’.

On 26 February 2011 (just fifteen days after the removal of Mubarak), the
Choir Project performed their ‘The People Want the Life of the Square’ (‘al-
sha'b yurid hayat al-midan’). The performance, composed lyrically from the
chants and slogans that echoed all over Egypt during the eighteen days, was
an attempt to memorialise and talk about what constituted ‘Tahrir’.

But what were the eighteen days about? How did ‘the people’ emerge in its context and
with what meanings?

Tahrir is marked by the openness, fluidity and contingency of its temporal
boundaries (When did it start? What were its beginnings? Where should we locate
them? When does it end?). This fluidity relates to the histories of struggle that
preceded the revolution and made it possible. Prime among these has been the
Kefâya movement, which made protesting in the streets again a possibility after
the years of containment since the 1970s and 1980s. The 6 April movement and
the National Association for Change, among others, contributed significantly to
a rethinking and an eventual emergence of ‘the people’ through the visibility of
protest in the ‘public’. Similarly, there were student and worker protests, most
exemplified in the Mehala struggles of 2008 which also witnessed the takeover
of the main square and the besieging of the city for forty-five days. In addition
to these ‘visible’ protests and contestations, what Bayat called non-movements,
or the daily encroachments and everyday struggles by the marginalised, have been simmering for years.²⁷

Second, the temporal ambiguity of Tahrir relates to the disruption of the political and social familiar, most exemplified in the daily rhythms that were routinised in Tahrir Square after its takeover on the evening of Friday, 28 January 2011. Depending on one’s spatial lens, the capture of the square followed the ‘battle of the bridges’, as some participants named the confrontations at the Galaa and Qasr al-Nil bridges leading to Tahrir. The marching from all corners of Cairo had started right after Friday prayers on 28 January. As images and narratives relay, protesters and those who amassed ultimately at Tahrir represented people from all walks of life: old and young, men and women, rich and poor, Cairenes and people from the governorates, veiled women and bearded men, workers, students, housewives, retirees, the unemployed and many, many others. For those who did not march to the square and fought for ‘bread, freedom and justice’ within the neighbourhoods, a similar heterogeneity prevailed that reflected more the social make-up of those areas. Their confrontations with the police (mainly at police stations) also reflected this melange of ‘the people’. Then the struggle was articulated as ‘the people’ against the state, more specifically its security apparatus and its alliance with the business elite.

I joined the march from Mohamed Mahmoud Mosque that moved through the affluent neighbourhoods of Mohandeseen and then Dokki. Masses marched down the streets, reciting one slogan after another denouncing the brutality of the police force, demanding the dismantling of the regime, inviting Egyptians to come down and join them (inżil ya Masri), and making the three demands of ‘bread, freedom and social justice’ (‘aish, hurriyya, ‘adala ijtema‘iyya). Colla collected a substantial number of slogans that were inextricably linked to the marching and subsequent presence in Tahrir.²⁸

In the streets themselves, there are scores of other verses, ranging from the caustic Shurtat Masr, yâ shurtat Masr, intâ ha‘aytû kilâb al-‘asr (‘Egypt’s Police, Egypt’s Police, You’ve become nothing but Palace dogs’), to the defiant ‘Idrab idrab yâ Habib, mahma tadrab mish hansîbî’ (Hit us, beat us, O Habib [al-Adly, now former Minister of the Interior], hit all you want – we’re not going to leave!) … This poetry is not an ornament to the uprising − it is its soundtrack and also composes a significant part of the action itself.²⁹

Police and security forces surrounded the protesters, and each time the tension of possible violence rose, the speed of the chant ‘silmiyya’ (peaceful) and the intensity of the steps of the march escalated. Violent confrontations then ensued at the first bridge (Galaa), with teargas and water cannons descending from every direction, while police tanks blocked the entry to the bridge. By
5 pm, more and more people were collapsing to the ground with the intensity of the fighting. Then, suddenly, a different sound reverberated through the air: the stomping and chanting of a mass of people approaching at a distance. As they came closer, the figures of more protesters became visible. Turning to the bridge, yet with vision blurred from the teargas, one could barely identify five figures on top of the tank. The first thought that came to mind was: Aha! Now the shooting with live bullets will start. But, alas, it was radically different. The first line of protesters managed to capture the tanks, pushing the security forces to the second bridge and yet another battle. This scene of disappearing security forces – as if they were melting into thin air – was observed at different spots that evening. Ultimately, after much blood had been spilled, Tahrir became the stronghold of the protesters. We captured Tahrir! 'The people’ made their presence visible in the square.

The takeover of Tahrir has been symbolically critical to many protest movements for decades. Tahrir has historically been the centre of the city, with the Mujamma’ building – iconic of state bureaucratic apparatus – overlooking one of its borders. Entry points to the square are pathways to central locations in the city: from the downtown commercial and entertainment district, to the parliament, one of the main government hospitals, ministries (especially Interior and Social Welfare), Abdeen presidential palace, the Arab League, the Egyptian Museum, Omar Makram Mosque, Kasr el-Dobara Church, the downtown campus of the American University in Cairo, the old Nile Hilton (now renovated as the new Ritz Hotel), the Korniche, and bridges connecting to other parts of the city. Tahrir, therefore, is practically the hub of mobility, power, business and bureaucracy, art and, equally significantly, of protest. More important still, as Roger Owen describes it, ‘Created in the early 1950s out of an old military parade-ground, the square was meant to be the site for an annual celebration of Egypt's independence’.

In short, then, Tahrir has been simultaneously the site of spectacles of power and contestations against power. Yet it also bore signs of the times: decaying and old buildings next to flashy tourist hotels and establishments, metro stations and bus stops, shopping areas, cafes, fast-food chains and street vendors on the sidewalks. All of this surrounds the square that barely displays any green grass but which is enveloped in the flow of honking cars, pedestrians, traffic police, and many a time also security forces, all signalling the centrality of the space in the life of the city. Tahrir visually captured the meanings of neoliberal capitalism, of the simultaneity of the precarity and power that have engulfed the lives of Egyptians for years.

The evening of Friday, 28 January, all of this vanished in the presence of ‘the people’ who stormed and took over the square, setting up tents in the circle and at various side islands, and barricading entrances with barbed wire, stones, traffic lights and poles guarded by volunteer men and women. To enter, one had to
show an ID card and be subjected to searches in long lines that were separated by gender. The intensity of the searches varied according to the possibilities of violent eruptions, the most aggressive and bloody occurring on 2 February, also known as the ‘battle of the camel’.

‘The Life of the Midan [square]’, memorialised in the Choir Project performance, encapsulates what observers have documented as integral aspects of the ‘revolutions of the commons’ or the ‘new global revolutions’ that spread to many squares around the world.

Much could be said about what these new activisms have in common. They are all about appropriating real places, about a struggle against precarization, against extreme competition and against the drivenness of contemporary production, largely dispensing with representation and weaving a transnational concatenation of social movements. There are, however, three specific vectors, on which these activisms enter new territory: in their search for new forms of living, in their organizational forms of radical inclusion, and in their insistence on re-appropriating time.32

These three vectors found expression in the everyday practices that constituted the life of Tahrir. Morning hours were filled with the ‘normal’ practices of cooking, cleaning, making tea and watching over the injured. Field hospitals at various locations in the square were filled with volunteers, donations of medicine and makeshift stations manned by doctors and nurses, each with a name marking their presence. Sites for cooking and tea sprang up, and gradually large numbers of people who sold ready-made foods and beverages began to flock into the square. Newspapers were laid on the ground, with stones on the corners to keep them from flying away, and some gathered at these spots to glance at the recent developments, while others sat in corners reading quietly and then engaging in endless conversations. If anything, talking, listening and debating were one of the most common features that marked the passing of the day, usually starting among two, then slowly developing into circles, marked by the diversity of those present. Those who had access to their laptops and smartphones sat in tents sending and receiving messages, tweeting and posting on social media sites. Spaces for artists, ‘revolution radio’ (radio al-thawra) and compiling live history books appeared at other corners of the square. Cartoons and caricatures, sometimes ending up in the form of posters that were on display on consecutive Fridays (the ‘million people days’, such as the Friday of Departure on 11 February, when there were calls made for millions to congregate in the squares) or around the walls of the square buildings, evoked laughs as much as they did tears.33 Many of the entrances were also packed with vendors selling flags and revolution knick-knacks, such as badges, caps and T-shirts bearing the
pictures of martyrs, or calendars and signs with 25 January engraved on them. As people settled into the evenings, poetry and songs, drama performances, satire and joke-telling circles both entertained and mobilised the protesters, and, more practically, reproduced the energy of emotions that filled the space. In some tents, strategising for the next day, the next Friday, the next move, continued until midnight. In short, the everyday of the eighteen days in Tahrir is part of a much larger geography of protest ethics and aesthetics, or what Ruanig referred to as a ‘new ethico-aesthetic paradigm’ that spread from Cairo to Tunis, New York, Seattle and Delhi, to Zuccotti Park, Syntagma Square and Puerta del Sol.

This new art of living together, of experimenting with different forms of politics, sociality and being, exemplifies what Greene termed ‘accents of protest’ in relation to viewing places themselves as ‘rhetorical tactics in movement towards social change’. Much as routinisation was setting in to define the sociality of Tahrir, contingency and uncertainty on the one hand and waiting on the other, with time going fast, yet not fast enough, shaped the temporal unfolding of the eighteen days. Though many were already certain, especially after the battle of the camel of the ability to not only sustain presence but also claim victory (although that victory was ambiguously defined), waiting and the tension that ensued after the Mubarak speeches maintained the edginess of the collective. Even more so, the flocking of thousands of residents to watch and take a picture on their mobile phones to prove their presence at ‘Tahrir’ compounded the carnivalesque feeling that descended on the space, particularly during daylight hours, producing among Tahrir occupiers the new nomenclature of ‘tourist participant’. Yet Tahrir was more than a place of tourists, joy, laughter and emerging hope; it was also steeped in fear, rage, trepidation, exhaustion, exuberance and sadness, all at once, all defining a collective or a ‘people’ that shared the action of struggle, of presence, of defiance and refusal. Indeed, as Juris contends: ‘Mass actions, in particular, are shot through with liminoid moments of terror, panic, and play, generating high levels of affective solidarity’. This affective solidarity, the reorganisation of time, forms of living and modalities of interaction, the horizontal network, the collective without a leader, in their complex coming together – though not without their own conflicts and contradictions – signal in action rather than words that ‘a people is here’. As Badiou reflected:

In the midst of an event, the people is made up of those who know how to solve the problems that the event imposes on them… so that the place where everything is happening, that place that has become a symbol, may stay with the people at all costs.
The collective invoked in the category ‘the people’ was not about negating the social constructs that comprised society, such as gender, class, region, religion, age, education and profession, among others. Rather, the presence of an acting mass defining itself and being defined as ‘the people’ signalled the possibility of transcending the familiar content and performative subtexts that set the contours of how these categories inhabit the public and private. Accounts by many participants of reworked relationships at home – of different modes of negotiating power among parents and children, siblings, of different lines of fissures around political positions, and novel alliances or disconnections among friends and family – attest to how the collective was reworking the very premise and terms of reference of organising social worlds. Temporary as it may have been, the emergence of possibilities enveloped the very making of the category ‘the people’. This was not limited to those who made an appearance at Tahrir, but was also the case even for those who never set foot in the square but saluted the demonstrators while they passed through their neighbourhoods or contributed food and medicine to Tahrir and its inhabitants.38

A plethora of new social categories emerged to articulate the large spectrum of sociopolitical relations and positions encountered during the course of the eighteen days. These ranged from ‘thuwar’ (revolutionaries) and ‘shabab al-thaura’ (youth of the revolution), to ‘baltajiyya’ (thugs),39 ‘hiyb al-kanaba’ (‘couch party’, in reference to those who remained inactive at home watching TV), ‘qilla mundassa’ (the ‘infiltrating few’, in reference to allegations about foreign agendas and perpetrators instigating the revolution), ‘al-aydi al-khafiyya’ (‘invisible hands’ – perpetrators, or those who killed protesters, who were not identified), ‘al-muwatin al-sharif’ (‘the honourable citizen’ who responded to state calls to quell the revolutionaries or report on ‘suspicious’ acts) and ‘al-aglabiya al-samita’ (‘the silent majority’). These and many others populated the social fields that defined the eighteen days and their aftermath. They speak of attempts to break the power of the collective that demanded the toppling of the regime. That such attempts would gain ground soon after the end of the eighteen days was still unimaginable within the bounds of the space of Tahrir. Rather – and despite many instances that comprised rift, dissonance and conflict within the square – the power of the category had its grip over ‘the people’.

As revolutionaries have testified, the feeling of belonging to a collective was regularly instantiated through this language about the people and its demands – it was the collective act of stating that the people wanted something that created the sense there was a social actor by that name. For many Egyptian activists, it was this locutionary event that proved there was an Egyptian people capable of revolutionary action in the first place.40
Processes and Moments: Paradoxes of the People in Unfolding Processes

But is ‘Tahrir’ the revolution and are the eighteen days the manifestation of the people? Certainly there have been several scholarly and popular productions that claimed as much. Yet without undermining either Tahrir or the eighteen days, it is equally critical to remember that what both represented, and their power, lies in the possibilities they created. The latter – namely possibilities for a different kind of politics, a different kind of social living and a different kind of order – are not to be limited or confined to a single place and time. Indeed, the revolution moved way outside of Tahrir and the eighteen days both spatially and temporally. ‘The people’ also moved with the revolution to signify, as time unfolded, contradictory meanings and trajectories, while reflecting and embodying struggles on the ground over power. It did not take long after the eighteen days for such struggles to make a violent appearance on the scene. On 8 and 9 March, one of the earliest attempts by the ruling elite (then symbolised by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and their alliances with the Muslim Brotherhood and the old business elite) to crack down on protesters in the square took place, as did the first murder after Tahrir in a ‘cleansing’ effort by the state to ‘restore order’ and claim the midan. Then, too, the familiar construction of gender, magnified in physical assaults on women protesters, and culminating in virginity tests for those held and detained by the army, made its ugly appearance. By then the preparations for the first constitutional referendum, held on 19 March 2011, signalled the re-emergence of religion as a category of signification for dividing ‘the people’. The ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns that occasioned the propaganda for the referendum reduced the debate about the constitution to a sociopolitical divide between those voting yes articulated as ‘for religion’ versus those for no, who were collapsed into the figure of the secularist. This binary of religious vs secularist not only reduced religion to Islam, but also subsumed the fundamental sociopolitical debates and demands for change, as pronounced in the squares a few weeks earlier.

Marked by the display of the ‘pink finger’, connoting the ink used to identify those who had already voted, the highest participation in electoral politics since January 2011 took place on 19 March 2011. The yes vote got the majority (more than 70 per cent – on a turnout of 41.2 per cent of eligible voters), and with it indicated a firmer alliance between those identified as the Islamists (that is, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, Jama’a Islamiyya and Jihadis), the military ruling SCAF and the old business elite which continued its attempts to struggle for power and became euphemistically known as al-felul (the remnants). With the passing of the constitutional amendments (the final product was quite different from what the electorate voted on), the attempt by those in power
to strengthen their grip over the people, to quell demands for real change and to physically eliminate revolutionaries and the remains of revolutionary spirit escalated, peaking in specific events that also captured the gaze of international and local media. These ranged from the 8 July attacks to the 9 October massacre of twenty-seven Copts, to events taking place in Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November and the cabinet killings in December. In short, the calendar of the first year of the revolution was chequered with almost monthly ‘spectacles’ of violence that targeted men, women, Copts, the poor and unemployed. The murals and graffiti that enveloped the cities of Egypt created a living museum of events as they unfolded. Graffiti of Mohamed Mahmoud was painted on the walls of the street that witnessed the fierce sniping of protesters attempting to kill or maim, most specifically blind their targets by aiming for the eyes. Renamed by protesters as the ‘Eyes of Freedom’ (‘uyun al-hurriyya), Mohamed Mahmoud Street and its graffiti stood as testimony to unfolding struggles for freedom. With the many events and the recurrent creation of new martyrs, the artists at Mohamed Mahmoud, much like those in other cities and towns, refused to preserve their artwork. ‘Why would you ever preserve graffiti?’ asked Abo Bakr, one of the graffiti artists. He referred to the paintings as ‘a product of this moment, anticipating new martyrs and new struggles would be painted in
their stead’. Indeed there were more martyrs, more events and more struggle, in turn producing more paintings and more graffiti.

The year following January 2011 was thus filled with attacks and violence to tame the revolutionary spirit and bodies of ‘the people’. Yet no matter how violent and aggressive the attacks (physical and otherwise) were, the more relentless the struggle against containment became. In fact, the more blood was spilled and the more protesters were demonised on TV screens, the more power the revolutionary process acquired. By slicing out al-thuwar (the revolutionaries) from the construct of ‘the people’ the ruling elites hoped not only to demonise the revolutionaries but to contain them. Equally important was dislodging the power of the very category of ‘the people’, and rendering the bodies of those identified as upholding the principles of revolution analogous to what Calderia referred to as the ‘unbounded body’. The latter signifies ‘a permeable body, open to intervention, on which manipulations by others are not considered problematic. On the other hand, the unbounded body is unprotected by individual rights, and indeed, results historically from their absence’.

Demonising the revolution had already started in the square during the eighteen days, through rumours of espionage and alleged foreign funding in instigating instability, both of which crystallised in the figure of the al-qilla al-mundassa (the infiltrating few) construct. In the months that followed, this same trope continued, yet it was coupled with the identification of demonstrators who continued to flock the streets as those who aim to destabilise the country, refuse to let the ‘wheel of production’ move forward or obstruct the ‘political roadmap’ of the ‘transition period’. In this scenario the ballot box, elections and constitutional assemblies represented nodes along the ‘political’ path that the revolution had to pass through in order to claim ‘success’, defined primarily in terms set by ruling elites and sanctioned by global powers, keen on maintaining the façade of the efficacy, sanctity and normality of liberal democracy. The latter is constituted in this naturalised frame of reference as the only possibility for political order and its appendage of economic growth. And since the Friday marches and demonstrations rarely ceased, demanding the fulfilment of the revolutionary principles, the attacks on demonstrators also became a routine part of the landscape. Workers, students, the unemployed, women and Copts came to the forefront of the struggle yet also became subject to the most ruthless campaigns of attack. From ‘fe’awiyaa’ allegations (that is, of representing narrow individual interests), to dismissive comments of ‘what were they doing there anyway’ primarily in reference to women, their being there thus making them deserving of the violence waged against them, to massive removals of street vendors and of residents of slum areas (‘ashwa’iyat), and detention and military trials of thousands of protesters and activists. Defaming those who refused to acquiesce with the new order even extended to alleging
they constituted the forces of the _thaura mudadda_ (counter-revolution), a term that was initially deployed by revolutionary groups. With this intensity of struggles the very meaning of ‘the people’ and ‘revolution’ became more and more contentious, contradictory and ambiguous, deployed with ease by all sorts of groups contending for ownership and control over ‘the people’ and the revolution.

Struggles were waged over not only categories but also space and squares, producing a shifting geography of protest that extended beyond Tahrir to a more expansive topography that was no longer contained in the singularity of a square. Much as the security apparatus attempted to cleanse Tahrir (literally of protesters, slogans, paintings and graffiti) and wall it off, protesters moved into many more new directions and spaces. And with every new wall that was erected around Tahrir, literally closing off the points of entry into the square through large cement blocks, creative cultural resistance intensified. Painting the blocks that walled off Tahrir, playing soccer in front of security buildings, establishing an open art square on the first Saturday of every month under the slogan of _fan al-midan_ (square art) complemented more systematic campaigns demanding justice, freedom and change. These ranged from the _kathibun_ (liars) campaign comprising documentary films that recounted episodes of military violence, screened in public spaces in neighbourhoods in major cities and towns, through the ‘No to Military Trials’ campaign to _Shaifinkum_ (We see you), a campaign whose followers aimed to trace, record and render visible public violations by the military. The former _lijan sha’biyya_ (neighbourhood watches) that were established on the night of Friday, 28 January to protect and defend localities also participated in the struggle against the sedimentation of old structures of power. For instance, the Imbaba Neighbourhood Committee initiated the ‘garbage campaign’, which deposited waste from the neighbourhood every Friday in front of the local council and the governorate buildings, thus confronting the state with its failed obligations towards the people. Others started ‘We are not Paying’ campaigns, calling on neighbours not to pay their electricity and gas bills because of the poor services they received. At many workplaces, independent syndicates that were inaugurated in May 2011 started popping up at factories, small shops and whole transport and textile sectors, as well as among female daily agrarian workers.

The first year of the revolution thus witnessed fundamental shifts. First, from a more concentrated geography of protest to dispersal over spaces and a variety of sites marking processes of protest and contestation. Second, along with the spatial dispersal, the singular face associated with the mass in Tahrir articulating ‘the people want’, a multitude of faces made their presence visible. Third, the gap between the formal political process of the ‘transition period’ and its agents, established in the events leading to 28 January, prevailed at a distance from
what was then also articulated as the collective singular of ‘the people’ or ‘the street’. This not only included members of the ruling elite in power (SCAF, the business elite, the Muslim Brothers and their Islamist allies), but also public opposition figures and emerging political parties. In the name of rule of law and orderly process, the latter also played by the rules of the game rather than challenging and defying them. Violent episodes occasioning the acquittal of security forces in long legal battles regarding the murder of protesters, or the refusal to initiate any plans to address the economic suffering and injustice, widened the distance between the imagination and possibilities that emerged in Tahrir and what was transpiring on the ground in daily struggles. The formal end of SCAF rule with the presidential elections of June 2012 and the onset of what was referred to as the ‘year of the Ikhwan’ (Muslim Brothers) if anything produced more confrontations and violence. I emphasise the ‘formal end’ of military rule to underscore the mutuality of the presence of the security apparatus with the elected president of the Ikhwan, much as the presence of the Ikhwan marked the year of SCAF rule.

The commemoration of the first anniversary of the revolution on 25 January 2012 brought out this mutuality in glaring relief. Supporters of the Muslim Brothers entered Tahrir the night before and fights ensued regarding the placing of the ‘central stage’ and the kind of banners to be hung around the square. Ikhwan supporters wanted a centre stage, to the exclusion of all other groups that fought over space in the square. Additionally, they articulated a celebratory agenda (having just won majority seats in parliament and the Shura council in elections that were dubious, to say the least) while other groups insisted on reiterating the demands of the revolution that were yet to be actualised, namely justice (especially for those killed and injured), freedom and socioeconomic restructuring. A map with images of martyrs signifying the different starting points and routes to Tahrir circulated in the days before.

Entering the square from the Qasr al-Nil bridge side, many relived the moments that had occasioned the capture of the square a year earlier, remembering those who had fallen or who were missing due to detention. Everyone stopped for a moment of silence in memory of the dead. Silence literally engulfed the thousands that stood there over the bridge. Seconds later an outburst of celebratory songs broke the silence, coming from the Ikhwan stage, sited at the entrance to the square. Those marching towards Tahrir responded in shock and anger with a new slogan: ‘bi’ bi’ bi’ al-thawra ya Badi’ (‘sell the revolution, oh Badi’, in reference to the spiritual guide of the Muslim Brothers, Mohammed Badi’). As the two groups came closer to each other, each side intensified its chants or raised the volume of the loudspeaker airing the songs higher. Then, in an act to command silence on the part of the protesters, those on the Ikhwan stage started playing tapes of Qur’an recitals. A second of silence was followed
by even louder chants against the *Ikhwan* and the betrayal of the revolution. This confrontation continued for a while, with each group standing its ground more firmly, one relying on the sound and power of religion, and the other on the sound and power of the people. The skirmish continued until eventually the *Ikhwan* shut down their speakers and were physically removed from the stage. Cheering erupted all over the square, as the victory of ‘the people’ was announced. The second capture of Tahrir was over.

This confrontation at the bridge on 25 January 2012 was a spectacular beginning to a long string of clashes between ‘a people’ and ‘another people’, each claiming legitimacy and power to speak in the totalising terms of the all. And within another six short months Mohamed Morsi was elected as president with thirteen million votes to his name (out of fifty-two million eligible voters). These six months and the year that followed his election and which culminated in the events of 30 June 2013, with which I started this chapter, witnessed yet more violence and attacks on ‘the people’ in the name of ‘the people’. Yet they also occasioned the intensity of forms of dispersed struggles against the departure and systematic erasure by those in power of revolutionary principles, ethos and demands. The episodes are many: suffice to mention the Port Said massacre of seventy-four football fans, the killing of protesters at the Ittihadiya presidential palace in the wake of the constitutional amendments decreed by Morsi in December 2012, the second Mohammed Mahmoud massacres while commemorating the killings of the first Mohamed Mohmoud a year earlier, the murder of protesters in Muqattam at the headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood Guidance Bureau, and the killing of thirty people in Port Said who contested the capital punishment sentence that targeted many of their football fans, while acquitting the security forces who made the massacre possible. Many more events dotted the unfolding of the year 2012, thus cementing the feeling that little has changed, though the faces have. Yet in the midst of this crackdown there were also many struggles that made their mark on the scene. Prime among these were in the Suez canal cities of Port Said, Suez and Ismailia, which declared their civil disobedience and later their ‘independence’ in the wake of the massacres in the city in January 2012 by police forces against protesters who were enraged by the court ruling of capital punishment. For almost three weeks and despite the declaration of a state of emergency and curfew, soccer games were played at 9 pm every evening, in defiance of the onset of curfew, in all the public squares of Port Said city. Police stations were closed down, and in their stead citizens took over a building and announced the ushering in of the ‘Popular Police Force’ with a large placard placed on top of the building. A car placed in front of the popular police station also carried a large white banner announcing its mission in the service of the people. The independence of Port Said was shortlived, yet it signalled the
resilience of defiance. Equally powerful were more satirical attempts to challenge power. These ranged from the holding of a Harlem Shake Dance at the gates of the Brotherhood Guidance Bureau, to soccer games parodying the figures of the players, political public personas. Cartoons, caricatures and, most popular, the satirical TV programme Al-Bernameg (The Programme) hosted by Bassem Youssef (similar to the CNN Jon Stewart show that aired live every Friday evening and was watched by millions of viewers).

In the midst of these tumultuous times, the continued hailing of a political process at the expense of socioeconomic justice, or as Abdelrahman has argued, ‘the hierarchy of demands and struggles’, increased the gap between the then and the now and how a possible future was envisaged. The banality of the discourse of elections, ballot boxes or the ambiguous Nahda (Renaissance) project of the Ikhwan and the grip of the security apparatus only intensified the desire to defy the system of power, or al-nizam. The greater the violence by state security and Ikhwan militias – identified by the Brotherhood as ‘the people’ – which filled the streets of cities and towns, the greater the defiance from those also identified as ‘the people’ who were refusing to be contained by the Ikhwan and their allies. The aggressive economic monopoly that started to take shape in yet another alliance between the old business elites and Muslim Brotherhood figures, the failures of the regime to effect any modicum of change in the daily lives of residents in cities, towns and villages, the speed with which the constitutional assembly passed the constitution in an exclusionary process and the spate of litigations that were brought against journalists, media members and activists who contested aspects of the regime, all rendered the sustainability of the ‘year of the Ikhwan’ practically impossible. Hence the exuberance with which people signed petitions supporting the tamarrud campaign (initiated by a group of young men who travelled across different cities, towns and villages in Egypt to collect the signatures of people who objected to the rule of the Brotherhood, demanding early elections) and took to the streets on 30 June 2012. Signing tamarrud was another way of rendering oneself, one’s signature and one’s ID card visible, announcing a presence and a refusal to acquiesce. It yet again announced a presence of ‘the people’ against oppressive and exclusionary power.

The line of the story that followed opens this chapter: 30 June protests, 3 July takeover by the army and announcement of the deposing of Morsi, a forty-seven-day-long sit-in at Rabaa and Nahda Squares by Morsi supporters, interrupted by scenes of violence erupting in many parts of Cairo, by Ikhwan supporters, by police forces, by residents and by the army, seemingly all against all. The culmination was the dispersal of the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins on 14 August, where the number of dead could not be even ascertained, yet the violence by security forces and the collective punishment that ensued was only countered by more violence on the part of Morsi and Ikhwan supporters against security.
forces and ‘the people’ at large. Shortly thereafter, the ‘war on terror’ propaganda took grip of the place, bringing in its wake more dead bodies, blood, torching of buildings and a declaration of a state of emergency, with curfew hours literally confining people to their homes every evening. Cairo, the city that never slept, turned dark, silent and empty, as if abandoned by ‘the people’.

As I was writing the conclusion to these reflections, the first administrative court in Cairo disbanded the Muslim Brotherhood and its activities and placed its properties under receivership of the state. Detentions of Ikhwan members in the name of securing the country against the reign of terror are reported daily. Yet whose reign of terror is descending on the place and people? Whose bodies are the unfettered bodies of the now and what comes next? We are witness to a ‘horror’ campaign on TV and radio with mutilated bodies on display every single day, redisplayed morning and evening, lest anyone doubt or forget the prevalence of violence and the urgency of ‘security’. We are also witness to bombings, random (or not so random) violent shootings in local neighbourhoods and an intensified feeling of rage and calls for revenge. Police and military campaigns to ‘liberate’ villages under siege of the Ikhwan (such as Kerdasa, Nahya and Delga) erase complex histories of conflict between the people and the security state apparatus, the people and ruthless business elite, the people and the local power brokers. The new demons are the Ikhwan; indeed their violence against the people and against the revolutionary processes of radical change are engraved in the memories of many, thus rendering the demonisation effective if not more violent. But which Ikhwan, and can we collapse power dynamics and struggles over power into a singular corporeal figure inhabited by the body of so-called Ikhwani? Can you even know one if you see one? And does it actually matter; since in the sweep to cleanse the social and political landscape of the so-called Ikhwan, what actually is being swept and cleansed away are any traces of contestation or protest against power of an order that is cementing itself aggressively in the recesses of the everyday lives of the people.

The cartoon that appeared on the Facebook page of the 6 April Youth Movement, Democratic Front, Alexandria, on 10 September 2013, captures the paradox of the present. Its caption reads:

They are all liars. The ones who want us to believe it is a war on Islam, and the others who want us to believe it is a war against the nation. But in the end it is only one war: against the POOR.48

Is it over? To view the present as anything but yet another episode in a long process of struggle is to deny the possibility that emerged in Tahrir. The one hope is that:
The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest

Each revolt, of course, may fail: tyrants may unleash bloody repression, military juntas may try to remain in power; traditional opposition groups may attempt to hijack movements; and religious hierarchies may jockey to take control. But what will not die are the political demands and desires that have been unleashed … As long as those demands and desires live, the cycle of struggles will continue.49

Notes
2. Rabaa is the name of a mosque in the Medinat Nasr neighbourhood in Cairo, and Nahda is a square opposite Cairo University in Giza. Both of these spaces were key sites in the sit-ins in support of Morsi’s presidency and the rule of the Muslim Brothers that lasted for forty-seven days. The sit-ins started on 30 June 2013 and were dispersed by security forces on 14 August.


9. My colleague Martina Rieker and I serve as the co-principal investigators of the ‘Imagining the Political’ project, which is funded by the Canadian International Development Research Center. We work closely with a team of young scholars who have all participated in the political and social scene since January 2011; many had political and activist engagements that long preceded the revolution.


15. Ibid., 3.

16. Ibid., 3.


22. The Choir Project – initially named Cairo Complaints Choir – started in May 2010. It began as an offshoot of the International Complaints Choir, a project initiated by two Finnish artists with the aim of “transforming the huge energy people put into complaining into something else.” See http://thechoirproject.webs.com/. The Project invites people for a week-long workshop, during which participants collectively write and compose songs which are then performed before an audience. On such creative protest songs see also Garlough, this volume.


24. The Choir performed similarly after key incidents that occurred subsequent to February 2011; see, for instance, Ya Ana Ya Inta (‘Either Me or You’) that followed the Jum’at al-Hawiyya (‘Friday of Identity’) demonstrations in July 2011, and Eih al-‘Ibara (‘What Happened’) that followed the Maspero Massacre in October 2011. http://thechoirproject.webs.com/apps/videos/


29. Ibid., 1.


